

The Right to Live in the Community

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De-institutionalisation in Croatia: A Pioneering Example

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„special attention should be devoted to creating the possibility of deinstitutionalized care for and protection of disabled persons by more open co-operation between the public and private sectors...” (National Programme for the Integration of the Republic of Croatia into the European Union - 2005 Zagreb, p. 210, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, 2005.)

Croatia, one of the accession countries to the EU, has in numerous strategic documents committed itself to deinstitutionalization and the development of community-based services with the aim of promoting the social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities and the establishment of community based services are relevant to all of the following EU policies: Human rights, Social exclusion, Poverty reduction, Anti-discrimination, Employment and Equal opportunities.

Croatia is currently also involved in the process of reforming its social welfare system.

For us, this as an opportunity to initiate change in both policy and practice and prompt the development of mechanisms which will enable people with intellectual disabilities to live included in society.

Two thirds of people with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities in Croatia live at home. They live in communities which have an almost complete lack of community-based support services. The vast majority lives in social isolation, excluded from society.

In Croatia there are 32 residential institutions for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. One third of people with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities (4,468 people) reside in these institutions. An unknown number of people with intellectual disabilities reside in other types of social welfare institutions. The average capacity of the institutions is 100 people, they are usually geographically isolated and people receive support in accordance with the Medical Model of care.

Since year 2001 there has been a continuous increase in the number of people with intellectual disabilities residing in institutions.

Even though social inclusion and deinstitutionalization are already familiar terms in Croatia, there is a serious lack of real Government commitment to implement its own deinstitutionalization policy. At the same time, there is also insufficient incentive by the government to develop community-based support services, a precondition for deinstitutionalization.

The Community for All Initiative: Croatia

This initiative proposes to transform the Center for Rehabilitation Stancic, a long-stay institution for almost 400 people with intellectual disabilities, into a community-based service provider. This will be the first large-scale deinstitutionalization effort in Central and Eastern Europe. The Initiative will be financed by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in partnership with the Open Society Mental Health Initiative and will be implemented over a period of 5 years. The Association for Promoting Inclusion has over the past 8 years developed models of community-based services such as supported housing, supported employment and support to families and is therefore in a position to coordinate the transformation of Stancic into a community-based service provider. This will include:

- providing community-based housing training to Stancic staff,
- developing person-centered plans for each Stancic resident,
- providing peer support to Stancic residents (implemented by members of the Association for Self Advocacy)
- developing a quality assurance and monitoring system, and
- developing a client support needs database.

Expected results

At the end of the 5 year transformation period, Stancic will be transformed into a community-based service provider and will offer supported housing and Day/employment programs to its former residents.

All community-based housing services provided under this initiative will be family-scale, designed to normalize the living environment of people with disabilities, and integrated into the community.

- Former Stancic residents will be living in the community in houses or apartments (on the average 4 people will share an apartment)
- Former Stancic staff will be trained to provide support to the clients in the community both in the housing and employment programs
- The model of care will shift from medical to social
- Service quality standards currently lacking in Croatia will be developed
- The quality of life of former residents will be significantly improved while the financial responsibilities of the State remain unchanged

This project is the initial effort in Croatia to develop a comprehensive system of family-scale community supports, eliminating the need for institutional care. Both the programmatic and the financial mechanisms will be developed to assure the long-term viability of community-based services. It will demonstrate that comprehensive, sustainable and cost-effective community-based services can and must be developed as alternatives to institutional care. The transformation of Center Stancic will serve as a model for the transformation of other residential institutions in Croatia and in Central and Eastern Europe.